# MLS Next Pro: ‘We’re going to use this new league as a way to test concepts’

By Jeff Rueter (/author/jeff-rueter/) Dec 6, 2021

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MLS wants to make one thing very clear as it launches MLS Next Pro in 2022: this is not a reserves league.

Fourteen months have passed since *The Athletic* first reported (https://theathletic.com/2136000/2020/10/13/mls-reserves-league-usl/) that MLS was looking to launch a U.S. Soccer-sanctioned third-division competition to further its player development pathway. At the time, a soft launch in 2021 seemed possible. The prime objective was apparent for all to see: bridge the gap between MLS Next academies and their first teams while controlling every aspect of the competition.

As planning progressed, however, the league didn't want to pigeonhole itself into only rostering players under 23 years old. They also wanted to allow for signing over-age players who need a longer look before making an MLS roster. There was also a desire to include independent clubs (with or without academies) that could give a different type of competition to players in MLS setups.

So it isn't quite accurate to call these "U-23 teams" or "reserve teams." Instead, 20 MLS clubs will have *second teams* in the new league's inaugural season, with eight moving from USL and 12 launching anew.

Then there's Rochester New York FC, which will also join MLS Next Pro in 2022 and is co-owned by Jamie Vardy, Premier League winner and the sport's patron saint of players with non-traditional career paths.

## Club set to join MLS Next Pro

| ENTRY | CLUB |
|---|---|
| 2022 | Chicago Fire |
| | Colorado Rapids |
| | Columbus Crew |
| | FC Cincinnati |
| | FC Dallas |
| | Houston Dynamo |
| | Sporting KC |
| | Inter Miami |
| | Minnesota United |

| ENTRY | CLUB |
|---|---|
| | NE Revolution |
| | NYCFC |
| | Orlando City |
| | Philadelphia Union |
| | Portland Timbers |
| | Real Salt Lake |
| | SJ Earthquakes |
| | Seattle Sounders |
| | St. Louis City |
| | Toronto FC |
| | Vancouver Whitecaps |
| | Rochester (Ind.) |
| 2023 | Atlanta United |
| | Charlotte FC |
| | DC United |
| | LA Galaxy |
| | LAFC |

| ENTRY | CLUB |
|---|---|
| | Nashville SC |
| | NY Red Bulls |
| | Austin FC |

"I think it'll be massive, especially for the MLS development teams," Vardy told *The Athletic* ahead of Monday's announcement. "We'll give them something else to think about on the competition side, because we're not really going to have them age restrictions. We can have anyone, if they're good enough, from 16 all the way up to 35 or 36. That's the main thing: if you're good enough, you're playing. It's not an age thing, as in, we want to be as competitive as possible, and obviously challenging to win the league. That's what's been going on behind the scenes, trying to get everything into place and, fingers crossed, that's exactly what'll happen."

The former England international announced his ownership stake in the then-Rochester Rhinos back in June, telling *The Athletic* (https://theathletic.com/2648727/2021/06/15/ive-never-done-anything-the-normal-way-jamie-vardy-becomes-co-owner-of-us-team-rochester-rhinos/) that he's "never done anything the normal way." While the pandemic and his day job leading the line for Leicester City has kept him from visiting western New York yet, the club's history and the profile of the new MLS circuit appealed to his roots as an academy castoff looking to find an alternative route to the pro level. In tandem with David and Wendy Dworkin (who bought the Rhinos in 2016), he's bullish on the potential of an independent club in a league of MLS second sides.

As is often the case these days in American soccer, the club's rebirth after being dormant for the last four years was scored by a rebrand, leaving behind the Rhinos name (https://theathletic.com/2799766/2021/09/01/no-more-rhinos-as-rochester-and-vardy-rebrand-club-as-rochester-new-york-fc/), which dated back to the 1996 A-League season. Vardy assured that while the name is new, the club wouldn't forget its history, including its 1999 U.S. Open Cup triumph — the most recent instance of a non-MLS side winning the competition. And, importantly, RNYFC is expected to return to competing in the U.S. Open Cup when it resumes in 2022.

Vardy expects Rochster to be relevant in both the league and cup competitions, but the only independent club in a 21-side league will ultimately measure its success in another way: finding more players like Vardy.

"That's one thing we've said from day one: it's about developing the players and letting them show what they're about," Vardy said. "If they're winning games and playing well, then obviously other teams are going to take notice. It's not just the players, either: it's all the staff who are going to be involved. We want to be successful, but if they're so good at the job that it gets them a move, we don't want to be standing in their way. We want to see them succeed in life and want them to move on to bigger and better things."

MLS Next Pro will be helmed by president Charles Altchek, as well as senior vice president of competition and operations Ali Curtis. In the spirit of this developmental league, Altchek himself rose the MLS ladder from being a special assistant to the commissioner's office in 2014 to his current position: senior vice president of league growth and operations. Curtis also boasts serious chops in league circles, first for his run as MLS' senior director of player relations and competitions, as well as his work as sporting director of the New York Red Bulls and, more recently, general manager of Toronto FC.

In addition to championing development, Altchek said he also hopes the new league can grow interest in the sport in a World Cup year. It's slated to kick off in late March and play a 24-game regular season before a postseason commences in September. Teams will play in a mix of MLS stadiums and some secondary venues. While those locations will be confirmed at a later date, Altchek said some teams are getting "really creative" with where they'll play.

That's another thing this league could be: a place to take risks and try new ideas outside of the first-division spotlight.

"The whole idea around the new league is to test new ideas, to try new things and be really creative, both on and off the field," Atlchek said. "Whether it's new formats, new rules, new ideas — you know, nothing gimmicky, but in coordination with FIFA and with U.S. Soccer and with all the governing bodies. If there's things that we want to try, we're going to use this new league as a way to test concepts. We want to push the game forward on and off the field. If there are really creative things that we can test that may not be ready for Major League Soccer for whatever reason right away, the new league is going to provide that opportunity."

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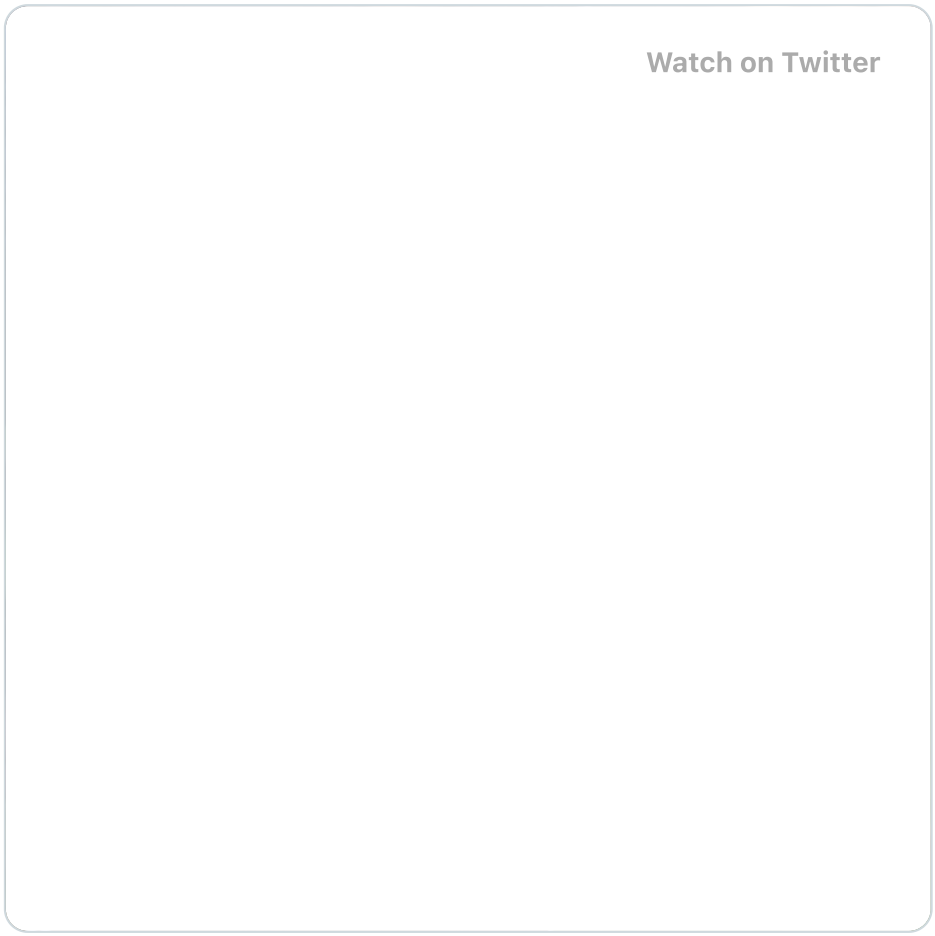


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There isn't one uniform reason why eight teams will wait until 2023 to join. Four (Atlanta United, D.C. United, Los Angeles Galaxy and New York Red Bulls) will field USL affiliates for one final season while LAFC is expected to retain its partnership with Las Vegas Lights (https://theathletic.com/2445808/2021/03/12/cherundolo-las-vegas-lafc/) for a second season. One (Charlotte FC) is an MLS expansion side wanting to focus solely on its first team as it launches (although, it's worth highlighting, St. Louis City SC will field a second team in 2022 before launching its first team in the 2023 MLS season). CF Montreal and Nashville SC have each abstained without public commentary around their non-participation.

While the overwhelming majority of participants will be second teams, the decision to allow for independent members is notable. MLS Next Pro has been provisionally granted U.S. third-division professional sanctioning, making it the third competition at that level of the pyramid, alongside USL League One and NISA (https://theathletic.com/2887201/2021/10/13/amid-crowded-lower-division-landscape-nisa-is-spreading-the-open-system-gospel-in-american-soccer/). When asked why MLS Next Pro would be more appealing to an independent club than the others, Altchek focused on what this league could offer rather than what was lacking elsewhere.

"First and foremost, we think there's a great opportunity to grow the game across the country, to reach new markets, reach new fans," he said. New owners, new investors, new staff, and develop new opportunities for those who want to break into the game both on and off the field. For our second teams, we know how important it is to compete in an intense environment against a mix of young players and grizzled veterans who are playing for their livelihood. That's super important, and we see that around the world."

(Rochester New York FC)

The league’s first independent member, Rochester, rejoins the lower division landscape in a new competition after years spent in operational limbo. Vardy, the Dworkins, and sporting director Lee Tucker head up the club and each have input in club decisions. They’ve affiliated with Empire United Youth Academy (https://rnyfc.com/academy/) in Rochester, an MLS Next academy whose alumni include goalkeeper Alex Bono and retired former U.S. youth international Jordan Allen. Vardy’s presence isn’t ceremonial, as he has a say in all club decisions alongside the Dworkins and Tucker. (“I’m not going to get involved and sit on me hands, sit back and see what happens,” Vardy said. “It’s not what I’m here for.”)

While Vardy said he was unable to reveal the club’s first coach, it sounds as if one is lined up. Next comes player recruitment, a process which began many months ago. Despite dozens of other clubs operating in independent third-division leagues, Vardy thinks MLS Next Pro’s aims will serve as further incentive for potential signings.

"We've got lists of players who we'd like to have playing for us from the U.S. and abroad," Vardy said. "We've got players that we'd like that might just be out of reach, but you can never not look at them. You can never not give it a try. You never know if they want to come in and play for you. We've also got players from the MLS Next that we could promote straightaway into our first team; having watched them, they're good enough. I think for them boys, as well, it's showing them that there is a pathway to pro; why not do it through us?"

Vardy added that he was initially surprised to learn MLS didn't have a league operating between its academies and first teams, but alluded to "trying to grow other leagues" at the lower division levels. MLS had partnered with the USL dating back to the 2013 season, ultimately deciding to launch a new competition to have greater control over the environment in which its second teams were operating. While the USL is now looking to distance itself from MLS' operational standard (https://theathletic.com/2720583/2021/07/21/usl-promotion-relegation-calendar/) by exploring (closed) promotion and relegation and a potential calendar inversion, MLS Next Pro will launch with a handful of second teams with previous operational experience.

Even without a direct tie to an MLS first team, Vardy believes that his presence will reassure players and staff alike that the club will operate with each individual's professional ambitions in mind.

"If you're not getting the minutes in at the younger ages and you're just stuck on a training field, you're not really gonna get used to that match atmosphere, that match tempo," Vardy said. "You're not going to get your fitness as high as you'd like it, because there's nothing better for you than playing games to make sure everything is developing."

Details about the sporting framework of this league are expected in the coming weeks and months. Altchek deemed Curtis "the perfect person to lead the competition and operations of this new league," citing both his playing experience and his time in the front offices of the league and two of its clubs. While Rochester will be the only independent club in the inaugural season, Altchek alluded to "having some interesting conversations" with others about potentially joining MLS Next Pro as soon as 2023. He also referenced conversations with MLS' "partners around the world… who we already work with in different areas" about potential international competitions involving MLS Next Pro in future years.

As will be the case with its players and coaches, a lot of focus on the back of Monday's announcement will center on *potential*. For academy graduates, it'll be another step to assess their readiness to contribute to an MLS first team. For those who may be looking for another shot after being rejected elsewhere, the comparisons to Vardy's career path will be relentless. Similarly, the league is leaving itself open to recalibration as it operates while trying to find the most effective way to support MLS.

"We're singularly focused on what we're doing and how we do it as opposed to looking at what others are doing and how they're doing it," Altchek said. "We knew we needed to control our pro player pathway from start to finish. With the launch of MLS Next in 2020, we were able to create an opportunity for the best young players from around the country to compete against each other in a platform that we are now organizing. We're very proud of the progress we've made there and the growth that we've seen there — we now have the bottom of the pathway in a good spot. The question was: what's the connection between MLS Next and our first teams, and how is that working? We just decided that now is the time to control our own destiny from that perspective and connect MLS Next to what's happening with our first teams in a way that made the most sense for us: with the schedule, the competition, the different types of competition that we have, the rules within the competition, all the things that are important to us that are harder to achieve when you're not organizing the competition itself.

"We're now able to do that, and will be able to going forward. From a 'growing the game' perspective, that's been the core ethos of Major League Soccer from day one on the back of the World Cup in 1994."

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